

Return of the Missing

LYNX

How this
wild cat
is making an
unexpected
comeback.

Black tufts on the Eurasian lynx's ears may act as natural hearing aids.

B LYNX OFTEN TAKE SHELTER IN CAVERNS DURING THE DAY.

A LYNX MARKS TERRITORY BY SCRATCHING A TREE.

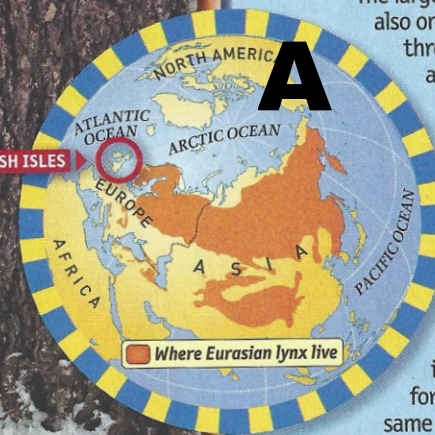
BY CRISPIN BOYER

Dodging campfires, sprinting from vicious dogs, and hiding in caves, the last Eurasian lynx in the British Isles lived a dangerous life. Since the late fifth century A.D., people here chopped down forests to clear land for their farms and pastures, leaving these elusive cats with few places to hide—and fewer prey to stalk. Once they began pouncing on livestock, lynx became public enemy number one. Their numbers dwindled, and they soon vanished from the British Isles. Today, scientists want to bring the cat back.

SECRETIVE LYNX

The largest of the four lynx species, the Eurasian lynx is also one of the widest ranging. These solitary cats slink through forests from western Europe across Russia and into Central Asia. They rely on stealth, keen vision, and super-hearing to stalk rabbits, rodents, birds, and deer four times their size. Without a thick cover of trees and shrubs to hide them, Eurasian lynx have a tough time ambushing prey. Wherever humans have destroyed their forest habitat, the cats have struggled to survive, and in some cases have disappeared.

But not for good. Wildlife conservationists in Switzerland, Germany, France, and other countries have taken Eurasian lynx from elsewhere in their range and reintroduced them to these old forest haunts. Now scientists are looking to do the same thing in the British Isles. Returning the cat would do more than just boost the numbers of this once-threatened species. A win for the lynx is a win for the forest.



Eurasian lynx mothers give birth to up to four kittens at a time.

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LYNX KITTENS BECOME INDEPENDENT BY THE TIME THEY'RE A YEAR OLD.

E BALANCING ACT

Imagine if you popped the hood of your parents' car and started pulling out parts. It wouldn't take long for the engine to sputter or burn too much gas or belch smoke. The forests of the British Isles went similarly out of whack when the Eurasian lynx disappeared. Without cats to hunt them, deer populations skyrocketed.

Deer nibble on the leaves of trees and bushes for food, and soon large areas of British forest couldn't keep up with their appetites. Birds and rodents that relied on shelter provided by the lower level of forest vegetation fell prey to foxes, which lynx also hunt. "The system is now clearly unbalanced, even to the untrained eye," says Paul O'Donoghue, the conservation biologist who founded the Lynx UK Trust project to reintroduce lynx to the British Isles. "We have forests where regrowth has stopped because of all the deer."

Bringing this cat back to the British Isles will restore balance to the forests by controlling the deer population. "And the lynx is an ambassador for other endangered animals," O'Donoghue says. "It will inspire people to protect not just the lynx but other species."

LAND OF THE LYNX

O'Donoghue hopes to begin bringing lynx to the British Isles within the next year. He'll relocate the animals from areas in Europe with healthy populations or where the cats are still hunted. "In a lot of places in Europe, lynx are a trophy species," he says. "We want to take animals with a bounty on their heads and bring them to Britain."

His first relocation destination—for about four lynx—is a secret spot "somewhere in the wilds of Scotland," where the forests are thick, deer are plentiful, and busy roads are rare. (Speeding cars will be the lynx's biggest threat.) Each released cat will be fit with a GPS collar, allowing scientists to monitor its location and health. "These lynx will have a team of guardian angels watching over them," O'Donoghue says. "We won't interfere unless they move into an area where they encounter trouble with people, and then we'll get them out of there." Eventually the scattered cats will start to meet up and have kittens of their own.

These relocated lynx and their offspring will live in a world that's far less dangerous than the one faced by their ancestors over 1,500 years ago. "The British Isles are a paradise for the lynx," O'Donoghue says. "They'll have lots of food. We have plenty of forests in the north. If those cats could talk, they'd say, 'This is great. You guys have picked a really nice spot. Thanks a lot.'"



BIG CATS INITIATIVE

YOU CAN HELP! In addition to Eurasian lynx, tigers, leopards, lions, and other big cats need protection. Learn more about National Geographic's Big Cats Initiative online. ngbigcats.org
PLUS: Check out Big Cat Week on Nat Geo WILD November 29–December 6.

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The reintroduction of Eurasian lynx to the British Isles may pave the way for a comeback of other long-gone predators to the area, including the gray wolf and brown bear.

WANT MORE?

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youtube.com/NatGeoKids

Section C

LYNX Family Reunion

The Eurasian lynx is the largest of four lynx species. Meet the other members of this feline family.

CANADA LYNX

RANGE Canada, Alaska, and many northern U.S. states
CLAIM TO FAME Furriest lynx

A cat built for the cold, the Canada lynx has a thick coat and extra-furry, wide paws that work like snowshoes, letting its lightweight body float atop deep snow. It needs such nimble feet to chase its favorite food, the snowshoe hare. The life cycles of lynx and hare are so intertwined that the cats will actually have smaller litters of kittens when hare numbers tumble.



BOBCAT

RANGE Most of North America
CLAIM TO FAME Most adaptable lynx

About twice the size of an average house cat, bobcats are generally the littlest lynx. They're also the most common wild cat in the United States. Supremely adaptable, bobcats make themselves at home in forests, deserts, mountains, and swamps. But consider yourself lucky if you see one in the wild. Like all lynx, these sneaky cats have camouflaged fur and usually prefer to hunt at night.



IBERIAN LYNX

RANGE The mountains of Spain and Spain
CLAIM TO FAME Rarest lynx

Once common across Portugal and Spain, Iberian lynx now live in just a few pockets of protected Spanish forest. When the lynx's favorite food—European rabbits—began dying from disease, lynx numbers plunged with them. Habitat loss and hunting took a toll on their numbers as well. Scientists took emergency action. They began breeding captive lynx and establishing protected areas for them in the wild. Only around 300 of these cats remain, making them the world's most endangered feline species.



KITTENS WILL HAVE SPOTS LIKE MOM BY THE TIME THEY'RE 14 WEEKS OLD.